

lected Chug Smith in place of Patrick Goldsmith, why— But what a difference between them! "Patrick Goldsmith," he concluded vehemently, "doesn't steal spotted calves and wrap their hides around well machines with the brand cut out—not by a danged sight! If she wants to marry a man that does such things, why let her, confound—"

He became conscious of the fact that he was wielding the quirt unmercifully, and that his horse vainly tried to plow through sand at racing speed. He quit it and slowed down.

"No," he said. "It won't be right to let her do it. By George! I'll put him over the swift route to— No, I won't do that. A fine business, to stand up and hear Tod Gorman readin' out, 'For the killin' of one Chug Silas Smith.' Not me! I'll get some evidence against him. A man can't cut a hide in this country, and expect for us to stand it."

It was close to sundown when he reached the locality for which he had been aiming. Beyond a low line of purple hills fast turning to sooty brown in the shadow the sun dropped its globe of burnished copper. Soon the line of the western hills cut the sun's disk into half and the desert began to gloom into a vast burned-over cinder bed.

"They must be camped close to Tucker's Tanks," muttered Goldy, and the next rise proved his guess to be correct. He sighted a fire and the hulk of a wagon's cover. Some horses were hobbled out. Just then his own stumbled, and Goldy noticed for the first time that he was breathing hard and very wet.

"Been thinking too much!" he growled. "It's me for sleeping out, because I won't sleep with him. How'll I get back? Durned if I won't have to borrow a horse! That's pleasant. Ride up to the enemy, say that I'm going to prosecute him in the courts for cattle rustling—an' won't you please lend me a horse? Gosh!"

He rode slowly up to the fire.

"Well, hello, Goldy!"

"Hello, Chug!"

"Where you ridin' so late?"

"I'm looking for a spotted calf. Seen him? Maybe you've seen a big white steer with curly horns and my brand on him too?"

"No, we ain't seen either of 'em. Get your saddle off. The boys'll be ridin' in soon."

"This horse is about done up."

"We can fix that, Goldy. Nobody's more welcome than you, if I do say it. Now turn your horse out and get ready for chuck. The boys'll be comin' along, and—"

"If you don't mind, Chug, I'll rope a horse and start back. I'm looking for a spotted calf, about a yearling. Seen him? Also a big white steer with—"

"You said that before, Goldy. No, we ain't seen him. Come along. Supper'll be ready in a jiffy, soon's that cook comes in with water."

"No, thanks, Chug; I'm looking for—I'll just rope that horse, that pinto out there, and ride on—"

"Shucks! You seem in one blamed hurry!"

Goldy started for the bunch of horses, and muttered to himself, "Christmas! but I'm a diplomat! Next thing I'd have smashed him in the face. The liar! I ought to walk back rather than take his horse too. Wonder if I can trust him with my horse till I send a man over? Oh, I'm a lawyer, I am!"

He grunted as he threw the rope over the pinto, hustled his saddle on it, wrenched its head down until he was fairly in the seat, and rode off.

THE plain was dead black now, and, save for a strip of lemon sky in the farthest west, night had thrust its canopy all over. The wind had lulled until at times there was but the merest rustle in the greasewood.

He had placed several ridges between him and the cattle outfit, when the feeling came that he had acted like a fool. Perhaps that had not been his spotted calf, anyway. He had no proof of it. And as for Miss Lucy, if she cared more for a beefy-faced cattle butcher, with a wart on his nose and a squint in both eyes, than she did for Patrick Goldsmith, why should that lack of taste on her part compel him to make an all-night ride? He was tired and sleepy, and the first severe pain of disappointment had worn away; so why not sleep in Chug Smith's camp, a place where he had always been welcome? Nothing against it at all. He pulled in his horse, turned about, and started back. In the dark he went a little wide of the trail, so that his second ap-

proach to the cattle camp was from a different direction. The horse had slowed to a walk. He was almost on them before he was heard.

Close to the fire a Navajo herder worked, skinning a beef. The Indian did not look up, and it was Chug himself who stepped out to see the new arrival. Chug's hands were bloody. In one of them he clutched a dripping knife and in the other a small patch of hide.

"That you, Snake?" he called, as if to one of his boys. "No; it's me, back again," said Goldy. "Hello! a new way to skin a beef, Chug? Taking it off in small pieces?"

"My knife slipped," answered Chug, with a laugh, tossing away the patch of hide.

It fell into the shadow; but Goldy's glance told him where it lay and that the color of the hide was white. There sounded the approach of several other horsemen. Goldy did not dismount, but sat his horse considering the whole affair.

"All right," laughed Chug nervously, wiping his knife. "Unsaddle, Goldy, and get ready to eat. Here come the rest of my boys."

Instead of accepting this invitation, Goldy uttered a short soliloquy; but one distinctly heard by the owner of the camp: "That's a large white steer your man is skinning, Chug, a two-year-old. I was looking around for that same large white steer today; but you hadn't seen him. Never saw a spotted calf, either, did you? I've a notion that the horns of that same steer are somewhat crooked, and I'll have a look at that piece of hide your knife slipped off."

In an instant he had swung the horse and his feet struck the sand close to where the patch lay in the shadow. The bridge lines with a lightninglike movement he had passed over the horse's head and looped in the crook of his arm. As he bent down to seize the piece of hide, Chug was on top of him.

"No you don't!" cried Chug.

Goldy straightened up, and the full force of his head and shoulder caught the other in the face and chin. So viciously had he raised himself that Chug was flung backward and fell asprawl, one hand dragging into the fire's embers. He uttered a howl of rage; but before he could regain his feet Goldy held the patch of hide and had sprung into the saddle again. A glance at the raw evidence proved to him all he had previously sus-

pected, and as Chug scrambled up he slapped him across the face with the damp skin.

"My brand, you cattle thief!" he cried out. "I've caught you with the goods at last! My brand, the Diamond G! You haven't seen a white steer with twisted horns, nor a spotted calf either, have you?"

The other ponies were almost at the camp. Their forms could be distinguished as moving shadows now. Chug Smith uttered a snarl of rage. He was caught with the goods. As Goldy turned to ride away, he shouted:

"My horse, you horsethief! Get him, Boys! Hold him! Rope him! A month's pay to the man that ropes him!"

A SCUFFLE sounded in the dark as the others tried to circle and head off the running horse. Goldy gave the pinto a vicious quiring now, the lash falling without mercy, and he had lunged forward with the scramble of a frightened horse. The nearest rider was passed so close that Goldy had to sway aside to keep the man's hand from his shirt; but in another instant he had gone into the dark of the circle beyond them.

"Rope him! Tie him up!" yelled Chug Smith frantically.

Without further directions the four cowboys pursued. Into the black they raced, and the fugitive could hear the pounding of their ponies' feet. He leaned forward and urged on his horse. He had stuffed the piece of hide into his shirt, and the dank touch of it maddened him. All depended on the borrowed horse now, and to be sure of his mount he must keep ahead of them. He knew that some of the men would circle and be ready to head him if he turned. He wondered if he was likely to meet any more of Chug's men.

"Wish I had picked his best horse," he gritted, as he brought the quirt down on the one he had selected. "If they get me, I'll have to begin to shoot, and I don't want to do that. Those fellows have nothing to do but follow his orders, the skunk! Wonder if this pony'll stop when a rope drops on him? I'll bet he's range broke, and that's what he'll do. Can't risk it. Their plugs are tired from a day's work, anyhow; but, Lordy! that fellow's gettin' closer up."

He could hear the nearest man steadily gaining on him. Close to the horse's neck he crouched, hoping to avoid the rope if possible. No—he could hear the puffing of the oncoming beast. Glancing behind, he saw the lifting form of the rider against the bit of light that had come with the rise of the moon. He saw the man's arm go up and imagined the circling of the rope.

"He's a plug, or he'd have slung it before now," muttered Goldy.

There sounded a slithering noise past his ear. The tough rawhide touched his shoulder, slipped from it to the horse's flank, and dropped to the ground. Goldy brought his quirt down in one terrific stroke, and his horse leaped like a goat.

"By Christmas! you'd be hard to get on the range, old scout," he cried out triumphantly; "but you're the horse for me tonight! If you'd stopped, I'd have been a goner. Go along!"

Far on his right he could hear another pounding along, as if to turn him back, and when he swung off to the left he heard a third rider there. They were making good time for jaded ponies that had worked a day among the cattle; but he felt that he had the fresher horse, and the fact that he had one the touch of a rope wouldn't stop filled him with wild exultation. He reached behind him and loosened his gun.

"Don't want to use it," he growled between set teeth; "but that right-hand man is drawing in. He may be a better rope artist than the other one too. I'd rather go to court and trust to evidence; but if you will come on, dang you! I'll do my best to give a brone to the coyotes. Maybe a shot would stop 'em. Rustlers aren't over-brave, anyhow."

He pulled the gun and fired into the greasewood, low down. A second later he heard the shout of a man and the report of an answering shot.

"That was a mistake," he muttered. "The fool thinks he's in the right. Chug Smith may skin my carcass too before he's done. Come on, you horse! If you get me out with this hide to show a jury, I'll let you run the range for the rest of time!"

The moon was fairly up now, and from the top of the next rise Goldy hoped to see that his pursuers had turned back. He would make a good target against the



"A Month's Pay to the Man that Ropes Him!"

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